



Testimony Regarding

HB 5037, An Act Adjusting the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June 30, 2023

Judicial Department Budget

Appropriations Committee

February 16, 2022

***H.B. No. 5037 (COMM) AN ACT ADJUSTING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM ENDING JUNE 30, 2023.**

Good evening Senators Osten, Winfield & Miner, Representatives Walker, Candelaria & Pavalock-D'Amato, and members of the Committee. My name is Cara Mackler and I am the Director of Campus Services and Legislative Liaison at The Center for Empowerment and Education. We provide confidential services at no cost to domestic violence and sexual assault victims in 13 towns in the Greater Danbury area including Bethel, Bridgewater, Brookfield, Danbury, Kent, New Fairfield, New Milford, Newtown, Redding, Ridgefield, Roxbury, Sherman, and Washington. Our services include counseling, support groups, safety planning, court-based and campus advocacy, hospital and law enforcement accompaniment, among others. We are a member organization of the Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence and the Connecticut Alliance to End Sexual Violence.

I am writing in strong support of the provision in the Governor's proposal in H.B. No. 5037 (COMM) AN ACT ADJUSTING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM ENDING JUNE 30, 2023 to enhance funding for victim service providers.

This funding provision is a direct result of the devastating loss of Victim of Crimes Act Funds (VOCA) that support our work supporting victims of domestic and sexual violence. VOCA funding, generated from federal criminal fines and fees, is at an all-time low due to an issue that redirected those fines and fees to the General Treasury for the past few years. This is a federally-created problem that will unfortunately have a huge impact on survivors right here in Connecticut. That is why we are asking the state to step forward and provide temporary, one-time funding to fill this federal gap.

VOCA funds ensure victims have access to much of our life-saving direct services provided at our main headquarters and our satellite office at Western Connecticut State University. These services include, but are not limited to, crisis intervention such as responding to the hospitals when a victim has been sexually assaulted and is getting a forensic evidence collection kit performed or responding to the police stations to assist with reporting their abuse. VOCA funds also help us provide our advocacy services when victims begin navigating complex systems in the community or on campus, such as working with the Title IX and Judicial Affairs offices to support college students experiencing stalking, dating abuse, or sexual assault on campus.

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In the past month alone, our campus staff, funded by VOCA, assisted three college students throughout their Title IX investigative process, including three judicial hearings related to sexual misconduct. All three victims were overwhelmed by the process and were incredibly grateful to have a trained and trauma-informed professional from The Center for Empowerment and Education to provide both emotional support throughout the process and advocacy on their behalf, informing them of their rights and options every step of the way.

The need for these critical services, funded by VOCA, have only increased in the past two years. Victims need our services now more than ever and the loss of VOCA funding would cost thousands of victims the support they need in the most vulnerable times of their lives.

The federal VOCA Fix Act was signed into law this past summer ensuring that, moving forward, all fines and fees from deferred prosecution will be deposited into VOCA. However, due to several years of reduced deposits prior to the fix, the VOCA Fund has largely been drawn down resulting in an anticipated 50% reduction in victim assistance grants for the next two fiscal years to all states, including Connecticut, until the Fund can be replenished.

We applaud the Governor for proposing the use of CSFRF funds in FY23 to address this temporary, one-time funding need. While we understand that the budget adjustments currently being considered by the legislature are specific to fiscal year 2023, it is important to note that the federal government anticipates the federal VOCA funding reduction will be present for both fiscal years 2023 and 2024. To the extent that CSFRF funds are available beyond FY23, we respectfully request that the General Assembly allocate those funds to cover the VOCA funding gap for both FY23 and FY24.

I urge you to support the Governor's use of ARPA funds to ensure that the loss of VOCA funds does not harm victims in our state.

As you may be well familiar, sexual violence on college campuses is an epidemic of its own. Connecticut college students deserve the opportunity to access our confidential and no cost services to begin their healing process as soon as possible. This is why it is absolutely critical to maintain the funding that supports these life-saving services at a stable level.

Thank you very much for your service to victims of crime, and victims of sexual and domestic violence, in Connecticut. Please do not hesitate to contact me with questions.

Sincerely,

Cara Mackler

Director of Campus Services/Legislative Liaison

The Center for Empowerment and Education

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